

DRAFT FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Delano-Earlimart Irrigation District Turnipseed Groundwater Bank Phase II

FONSI-09-108

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Introduction

In accordance with section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), as amended, the South-Central California Area Office of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), has determined that the approval to partially fund Delano-Earlimart Irrigation District's (DEID) Turnipseed Groundwater Bank Phase II is not a major federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment and an environmental impact statement is not required. This Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) is supported by Reclamation's draft Environmental Assessment (EA)/Initial Study (IS) number EA/IS-09-108, *Delano-Earlimart Irrigation District Turnipseed Groundwater Bank Phase II*, and is hereby incorporated by reference. The EA/IS is being jointly prepared by Reclamation, as the lead federal agency, and DEID, as the lead state agency, to satisfy the requirements of both NEPA and the California Environmental Quality Act, respectively.

Background

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Recovery Act) of 2009 is a bill signed into law by President Barack Obama on February 17, 2009 in an effort to jumpstart the nation's economy, create and/or save jobs, and foster unprecedented levels of accountability and transparency in government spending. The Department of the Interior has been tasked with managing \$3 billion in investments as part of the Recovery Act, of which Reclamation will devote \$260 million for projects in the State of California (State) to expand water supplies, repair aging water infrastructure, and mitigate the effects of a devastating drought that the State is currently experiencing. Through a Challenge Grant, Reclamation provides 50/50 cost-share using Recovery Act funds for approved projects focused on water conservation, efficiency, and marketing. Selected projects were scheduled to expend funds quickly and that would be completed by September 30, 2010.

DEID applied for and was selected as a potential recipient to receive a Recovery Act-funded Challenge Grant to help with the construction of their Turnipseed Groundwater Bank Phase II (Proposed Action). The Proposed Action would convert an existing 80-acre recharge basin into a true water banking facility. Construction would include installing three extraction wells and increasing the surface storage capacity of the facility by excavating (deepening) into the basin and building up the levees.

Findings

Water Resources

The Proposed Action would not generate a new supply of water; rather, it would improve the reliability of DEID water supplies by using available surplus surface water to recharge the underlying groundwater subbasin for later use when groundwater pumping is necessary. The Proposed Action does not include additional groundwater pumping; rather, it would help to mitigate the water-level impacts associated with existing groundwater pumping. In particular, the increased ability to recharge available surface water supplies would help to mitigate the projected long-term decline in groundwater levels. Groundwater recoveries would not exceed the total water recharged, as to not deplete any groundwater supplies.

Since the surface water supply has a lower salinity level than the groundwater, the long-term infiltration of these surface water supplies would serve to maintain and enhance the generally good quality of groundwater underlying the district area. Therefore, the Proposed Action would have slight beneficial impacts to DEID water resources.

Land Use

The construction of wells and water banking facilities for irrigation use is considered to be agriculture-related, so there would be no impacts to prime farm lands. The Proposed Action would not involve the development of new agriculture lands since the district is almost fully developed to agriculture. There are no residences adjacent to the basin boundaries, and construction of the Proposed Action would not result in any new housing or new permanent population growth that would exceed official regional or local population projections in the DEID service area. The main purpose of the Proposed Action is to improve DEID's water supply reliability in order to meet irrigation demands during dry hydrological years; therefore, no significant impacts to land use are expected.

Biological Resources

Most of the habitat types required by species protected by the Endangered Species Act (ESA) do not occur in the Proposed Action area. The Proposed Action would not involve the conversion of any land fallowed and untilled for three or more years. The Proposed Action also would not change the land use patterns of cultivated or fallowed fields. No critical habitat occurs within the area affected by the Proposed Action and so none of the primary constituent elements of any critical habitat would be affected.

The Proposed Action would implement Environmental Protection Measures to avoid or minimize effects to special-status species. Prior to construction, a pre-activity survey would be conducted by a qualified biologist to ensure that the construction areas remain unoccupied by sensitive species and, during construction, standard avoidance and minimization protocols would be followed to avoid impacts. Therefore, the Proposed Action is expected to have no significant impacts on biological resources.

Cultural Resources

Under the Proposed Action, construction would disturb existing rights-of-way of the existing recharge basin, add fill to the levees of the channelized White River, and disturb immediately adjacent farmland. An archaeological inventory report identified the need to consult with SHPO. Reclamation further determined that the Proposed Action comprise a no adverse effect to historic properties pursuant to 36 CFR Part 800.5(b). SHPO concurred with this finding on January 26, 2010. In the unlikely event that project implementation reveals previously unidentified cultural resources, then procedures outlined at 36 CFR Part 800.13(B) would be followed and would insure that significant impacts to cultural resources are avoided.

Indian Trust Assets (ITA)

There are no tribes possessing legal property interests held in trust by the United States in the lands involved with the Proposed Action. The nearest ITA is the Tule River Reservation approximately 22 miles northeast of the project location; therefore, this action would have no significant impacts on ITA.

Socioeconomic Resources

Over the long term, the Proposed Action would facilitate an increase in the reliability of DEID's surface water supply. This would subsequently help to maintain the economic viability of irrigated agriculture within the district, which presently includes a significant percentage of permanent crops. There is greater economic output associated with permanent crops, which includes a year-round demand for farm labor (as compared to annual crops). As a result, there could be slight beneficial impacts to socioeconomic resources.

Environmental Justice

To the extent that water supply reliability is improved in DEID, it would serve to support the continued viability of the agricultural economy that has developed in reliance (in whole or in part) upon it, which provides jobs to the residents of disadvantaged populations within the vicinity of DEID. As a result, there would be beneficial impacts to environmental justice from the implementation of the Proposed Action.

Air Quality

Short-term air quality impacts would be associated with construction, and would generally arise from dust generation (fugitive dust) and operation of construction equipment. The Proposed Action would include Environmental Protection Measures to reduce the amount of fugitive dust released from these construction activities.

Comparison of the estimated Proposed Action emissions with the thresholds for Federal conformity determinations indicate that project emissions are estimated to be below these thresholds. Therefore, there would be no significant impacts to air quality.

Global Climate Change

The Proposed Action would involve short-term impacts consisting of emissions during construction and long-term impacts are attributable to project operations and would involve the generation of electrical energy to power the electric motor pump drivers. Accordingly, project construction and operations under the Proposed Action would result in *de minimis* impacts to global climate change.

Cumulative Impacts

The Proposed Action, when taken into consideration with other similar existing and proposed projects, would ultimately improve water resources management in DEID. There would be a cumulative positive impact on groundwater levels and quality, owing to the long-term, increased groundwater recharging capability during times of surface water supply availability.

In recent years, land use changes to the south of DEID have involved the urbanization of agricultural lands. These types of changes are typically driven by economic pressures and they are as likely to occur without the Proposed Action as with it. Accordingly, no cumulative impacts to land use are anticipated.

Greenhouse gas (GHG) impacts are considered to be cumulative impacts. The Proposed Action, when added to other existing and proposed actions, would not contribute to adverse cumulative impacts to global climate change owing to the *de minimis* magnitude of annual GHG emissions.

The Proposed Action would not contribute to cumulative impacts to air quality, inasmuch as construction activities are short-term and operations would not result in adverse impacts to air quality beyond Federal thresholds.

The Proposed Action, when added to other similar existing and proposed actions, would have a slight beneficial contribution to cumulative impacts associated with environmental justice and socioeconomic resources. The Proposed Action would help support and maintain farm-related jobs that low-income and disadvantaged populations rely upon. In addition, some of these communities rely on groundwater as their main source of water supply so the long-term application of groundwater recharge would provide some replenishment to this source.